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Keeping Children and Teachers Together

The Good, the Bad, and the Wonderful!

by Kay Albrecht, Margaret Banks, Gwen Calhoun, Linda Dziadul, Carla Gwinn, Brooke Harrington, Brenda Kerr, Masami Mizukami, Amy Morris, Cheryl Peterson, and Rene Rhoads Summers

"It has been ten years since he played with blocks, painted his fingernails with tempera paint (much to his father's chagrin), grew over two inches in just a few months, and learned that Jimmy really was his friend — if he let him have a turn first. His hair is still red and he is almost six feet tall. He says he just stopped by to tell his "old" teacher hello! The appreciation in his mother's eyes reminds me of our close connection. What a wonderful and satisfying feeling." — Brenda Kerr

The early childhood literature is full of references to primary caregiving as a strategy for facilitating the development of infants and toddlers during the first three years of life (Bernhardt, 2000; Greenman & Stonehouse, 1996; Lally, 1995; Raikes, 1996; Reisenberg, 1995). Primary caregiving usually focuses on the development of an intimate, sensitive, and reciprocal relationship between children and their most frequent caregivers.

Our view of primary caregiving is more comprehensive, a view that offers the opportunity to develop close ties between parents, teachers, children, and school. Our idea, which we call primary teaching (although we are still looking for a neat, catchy, more descriptive name), is not limited to younger children. Preschool children also benefit from this approach.

Primary teaching can be viewed as a true partnership with families, placing the family at the center of the relationship, not on the periphery. It typically involves assigning each child and her family to a special person to get to know at school. The primary teacher then spends time gathering information and knowledge about the child's family, culture, unique temperament, cues, schedule, and personality, so he can be responsive and appropriate in developing relationships with the child and the family. With this information, the teacher is able to develop truly individualized curriculum for the family. [Curriculum is viewed here in its broadest sense as everything that can, by the nature of the setting (school vs. home), contribute to the child's development and the teacher's relationship with the child and the family.]

Components of Primary Teaching

There are three components of primary teaching (Albrecht & Miller, 2000). The first component is the relationship between the parents and the teacher. Because parents are the most significant people in a child's life, the relationship between the teacher and the parents is paramount. Seeing each other as partners is an essential component of early education. Primary teachers strive to develop the same trust and reciprocity with the family as the teacher strives to develop with the child.

The second component of primary teaching is the responsive relationship between the child and teacher. This relationship is based on careful observation of each child's individuality and on "a sense of personal and emotional involvement that is mutual" (Leavitt, 1994). Many experts — Gerber (1998), Shore (1997), Brazelton (1992) — have characterized the interactive relationship between caregivers and children as crucial. In order to grow up, young children need to know that the human world in which they live is a caring one that is responsive to their bio-behavioral needs.

All teachers form relationships with children. But a relationship is not enough. It must be mutual and recipro-

cal. Reciprocity refers to the careful give and take of interactions between the child and the teacher and their mutual interdependence upon one another (McMullen, 1999). Gordon (1970) calls this the "ping-ponging" of interactions — the child coos; the adult comments on the vocalization; the child coos longer and louder; the adult smiles and again comments. This mutual interdependence is not a one-way street between the teacher and the child. It is a multi-dimensional, two-way thoroughfare which is characterized by sensitive, reciprocal, and responsive interactions.

The interdependent relationship between teacher and child is crucial. It isn't just the adult's response that makes the child respond or connect. The child is as active a participant as the adult, engaging in continued or modified interaction by her verbal and non-verbal responses.

The third component of primary teaching is the balance between routine, interaction, stimulation, and time alone. An unfortunate legacy of the early education movement is the mistaken idea that children need constant stimulation. In reality, children need balance. They need sensitive responses to routines; warm, caring, intimate interactions with a primary teacher; stimulation from the environment; stimulation from toys, other adults, and children in the environment; and, most importantly, uninterrupted time alone to integrate their experiences.

Continuity of Care

Continuity of care is an extension of primary teaching that works to keep all of the components of relationships intact. The teacher stays the same, the peers stay the same, and the context stays the same. Every effort is made to maintain as many of these components for as long as possible. Also called looping and sustained instruction, continuity of care is receiving renewed attention in the early childhood literature as concerns about attachment and emotional development continue to be voiced.

Relationships between teachers and children are not formed overnight; they develop over time. The process of becoming familiar, learning each other's interactive styles, developing a joyful interest in each other's worlds, and learning to understand each other's communication style takes time. Primary teaching leads children and their teachers to take time with each step of the process. It does not require the child, the teacher, or the parents to be in a relationship "all at once."

Because it takes time to develop close, reciprocal relationships, teachers and children need long periods of time together. Frequent moves of children to new classrooms with new teachers disrupt the relationship-building process, forcing everyone (child, parents, and teacher) to start over.

Philosophically and experientially, primary teaching extends the length of time a teacher and her children stay together. Changing any of the components of continuity is done with caution. Groups stay together for at least 18 months and may stay together for up to three years or longer. The extended time together allows children to form strong ties to their primary teacher and to begin to form additional secondary relationships with other adults and children in the classroom. This much time allows parents and teachers to get to know and understand each other's needs, expectations, and talents.

When children need changes in their environments, primary teachers make those changes in the familiar setting of the classroom instead of requiring children to move to a new location and a new teacher. Or, children move with their primary teacher and their group of friends to a new classroom, changing only one of the components of continuous care at a time.

The Good

Primary Teaching Benefits Children

Teachers believe that primary teaching:

- facilitates the stages of attachment and therefore emotional and social growth and development.

- creates opportunities for children to develop intimate friendships with one another.

- allows teachers to more closely match experiences at school to experiences at home. Insight into family situations by teachers facilitates this match.

- helps children learn their teacher's style, expectations, and reactions. Children then feel safe, secure, and able to venture into new experiences.

- allows teachers to create long-term goals for the children. Instead of dealing with the same developmental milestones every year (like walking for infants, toilet training for toddlers, or controlling aggression for preschoolers), teachers can focus on long-term goals — like facilitating multiple intelligences, facilitating peer relationships, or even intervening in developmental delays.

- reduces teacher turnover. Teachers who accept primary teaching are making a long-term commitment which makes teachers want to see it through — to stay with it.

Primary Teaching Benefits Parents

Teachers believe that primary teaching:

- allows parents the time they need to get to know their teacher and to develop mutual trust.

■ facilitates reciprocity in relationships with parents where each is supportive and helpful to the other but neither dominates or controls the relationship. Teachers get to know the individual and unique needs of each parent and each family. Partnerships build over time just like relationships with children do, creating synergy between teachers, parents, and children.

■ facilitates communication between teachers and parents. Parents share information more readily when they are comfortable and connected to the teacher. The mutuality of the relationship heightens the willingness to keep communication flowing both ways.

Primary Teaching Benefits Teachers

Teachers believe that primary teaching:

■ creates opportunities for personal and professional growth — both in understanding child growth and development theory and research and in the best practices that emerge from this body of knowledge.

■ enhances teaching skills. Teachers must learn new skills (or revisit unused ones) as children grow and learn. The result is a varied and interesting teaching experience that never gets old or tiring.

■ allows teachers the opportunity to really get to know each child over time. Thus, it reduces the need to start over in building relationships with friends and/or teachers because of external demands like getting older, calendar year cycles, etc.

■ provides them with a better understanding of skill acquisition and development. The teacher is there — she sees (observes) what and how children acquire new skills. The result is a much more individualized understanding by the teacher of how children are learning. This understanding deepens insights and reduces errors in teaching judgment based on incomplete data.

■ creates excitement about emerging development and changes as they occur. Sharing this excitement and insight with parents becomes a natural extension.

■ allows teachers to spend more time actually interacting with children and gaining an understanding of each child's unique developmental skills, abilities, and temperament. This approach slows down the pace of the school day and allows time to take on a very different meaning — one that is more regulated by the children and their experiences than by the clock or calendar. This slower sense of time increases teachers' feelings of accomplishment in curriculum, observation, and interaction.

■ allows a shared history to emerge that is the foundation of future learning and interaction. As a result, primary teaching lowers the demands of the classroom — particularly the guidance and discipline demands. It also allows teachers to build on children's skills over time.

■ eliminates the time it takes to get to know children and their families after a transition. Everyone knows that transition times are building times. Teachers are getting to know individual children, dynamics between children, and individual interests and strengths. When this time is removed from the annual calendar, teachers get a wonderful gift — as much as two more months for planned and emergent activities and experiences. Teachers report that there is always tomorrow to follow an emergent idea, complete a project, or address a developmental issue. This sense of relaxation is communicated to children and to their families.

■ facilitates emergent curriculum planning and implementation. Teachers are challenged to accept new emergent ideas and to create innovative activities and experi-ences for children.

■ helps develop mutual, reciprocal relationships between teachers and parents. When teachers get to know parents over extended periods of time, relationships grow and mature, allowing teachers to develop true partnerships with parents. As teachers figure out the parents of children in their primary groups, trust creates an ease of interaction that allows both teachers and parents to relax.

■ increases job satisfaction and enhances professionalism. The autonomy of being responsible and in charge of a group of children, coupled with increases in interpersonal comfort with both children and their parents, leads to higher level of professional and job satisfaction. It allows teachers time to see development unfold, then to reap the benefits of teaching by seeing children acquire, practice, and then perfect and apply skills and abilities. When teachers tell us why they teach, it is this reason that they give most often. Watching children grow and develop competently and contributing to developmental success is highly motivating for many teachers.

The Bad

Teachers leave. Many directors and teachers report that they won't attempt primary teaching because it makes turnover even harder on everyone. We admit that this is true. Longer relationships are even harder to end.

Mismatches between teachers and children and between parents and teachers happen. Although this is a real concern for parents and teachers, it happens rarely. In almost 13 years of using this approach, it has happened only twice (once the mismatch was

between the child and the teacher and once the mismatch was between the teacher and the parent). When it does happen, we reassign the child, including the parents in the decision and the process. Children sometimes make their own selections of primary teachers — preferring a different teacher than the one to whom they have been assigned. We listen to the children. We have found this concern almost completely unfounded and very easy to correct.

Parents mistake primary teachings as less than "real" teaching. This concern emerges from primary groups that are formed during infancy and continue into the preschool years. When parents view teachers initially as "caregivers," how do we get them to view teachers as educators? This is actually a programmatic issue addressed through good programming — regular developmental assessments, observations of children at play shared with parents, posted curriculum plans that document all of curriculum, vivid documentations of what children are learning and doing, open, fluid communication between teachers and parents, and regular and frequent parent conferences and meetings. Primary teaching does not correct poor programming. It is not a panacea for inadequate funding, poor quality, or poor teacher selection.

Boundaries can be blurred. Mutual, intimate relationships create the risk that boundaries between parent and teacher and therefore school and home can be blurred. Teachers connect with families in so many ways that it can be difficult to keep clear boundaries between the teaching role and the parenting role or the school role and the family role. This is a huge training issue in schools that adopt primary teaching. Teachers often need help keeping boundaries clear and distinct. We address this issue head on in our training programs and discuss it often with teachers individually and in staff meetings.

And the Wonderful!

A recurring theme in the insights of teachers who are involved in primary teaching is the intimacy of the relationship — the mutual and emotional connection that the teacher feels, first with the child and second with his family. Their words speak eloquently to the wonderful results of this difficult to understand and challenging to implement idea.

"The continuity that results from primary teaching enhances children's development, the teacher's feelings of accomplishment, and the family's commitment to their child's education." — Cheryl Peterson

"Primary teachers know that each new developmental step will be met by the child, parent, and teacher TOGETHER. What a wonderful feeling! We share each stage of development, feel responsible for the child's education, and feel confident that the future will be joyfully celebrated."
— Linda Dziadul

"I have heard the following: 'I may join the Peace Corps . . .'; 'I am going back to graduate school . . .'; 'I may find another profession . . .'; 'BUT NOT BEFORE I FINISH WITH MY GROUP!' Primary teaching connects teachers to their children with a stronger bond — one that is not broken without careful consideration."
— Amy Morris

"Primary teaching is a special bond between teacher, children, and parents that can nourish and support a child's early years and give the child a positive view of self that will stay with her for a lifetime."
— Gwen Calhoun

"Primary teaching challenges the teacher to stretch and expand his knowledge. As children grow and mature, so does the teacher." — Ellen Connors

"Primary teaching creates an environment that enables families and teachers to build reciprocity — allowing a free flow of vital information that focuses on benefiting the child." — Cheryl Peterson

"Primary teaching validates my professionalism and teaching skill. I am responsible for a group of children, have direct contact with the parents, plan my own curriculum, and schedule and conduct parent meetings and conferences. It is a whole and complete job." — Brenda Kerr

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This article was written by the following faculty of HeartsHome Early Learning Center, a nationally accredited early childhood program. Teachers in this school have kept children and teachers together since the school opened in 1989 — gradually increasing the length of time teachers and children stay together as their understanding and insight into how primary teaching works increased. They share a commitment to expanding the use of primary teaching with all children, regardless of setting or sponsorship.

Kay Albrecht, Ph.D., is the founder and former director of HeartsHome Early Learning Center. HeartsHome joined the Bright Horizons/Family Solutions organization in December 1999.

Margaret Banks, B.Ed., accepted the challenge of starting with infants when she moved to Houston and HeartsHome. She has been with her children for 15 months.

Gwen Calhoun, BS, has watched her group of children grow and learn since they started school as infants over five years ago!

Linda Dziadul, BS, has been with her primary group for 14 months. She has five years of teaching experience the old way and never wants to go back!

Carla Gwinn, BS, is director of HeartsHome. She was a primary teacher at HeartsHome for seven years before assuming the director role. Her longest tenure with the same group of children was almost four years (from two-and-a-half through kindergarten).

Brooke Harrington, CDA, is an eight-year veteran. She is in her 17th month with the same group of children.

Brenda Kerr, CDA, has been at HeartsHome for 13 years. Her specialty is toddlers and she enjoys tenures of almost two years with each of her groups before facilitating a transition to preschool.

Masami Mizukami, AA (plus one year and counting!), started with his group four years ago after completing an international internship.

Amy Morris, BS, is assistant director at HeartsHome. Before, she was the prekindergarten-kindergarten teacher, which allowed her to work with children for two consecutive years before sending them on to elementary school.

Cheryl Peterson, BA, is a 13-year veteran of primary teaching at HeartsHome. She spends up to three years with her groups of children. She is the architect of the transition planning process that is used when children change either teacher, group, or classroom.

Rene Rhoads Summers, CDA, is in her third cycle of primary teaching. She specializes in infants and toddlers and stays with her children for three years before facilitating a transition to preschool.